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Journal of Risk and Financial Management

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Suggested Citation: Pisarović, Anamarija; Tišma, Sanja; Dujmović, Krševan Antun; Škrtić, Mira Mileusnić (2021) : The event of Croatia's EU accession and membership from the Croatian high school students' perspective, Journal of Risk and Financial Management, ISSN 1911-8074, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 14, Iss. 1, pp. 1-18,
<https://doi.org/10.3390/jrfm14010002>

This Version is available at:

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Article

The Event of Croatia's EU Accession and Membership from the Croatian High School Students' Perspective

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Abstract: The knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of the high school students on Croatia's European Union (EU) accession event were omitted in numerous public opinion polls conducted since the 2013 accession. Therefore, the paper shows key benefits of Croatia's EU accession and the recent attitudes of high school students about the meaning of this event for their future lives. Research methods include desktop analysis regarding previous researches of the population attitudes and a quantitative survey conducted in January 2017 on a sample of a total of 1944 school graduates who were interviewed on issues of knowledge, perception and attitude to the event of Croatia's entrance and membership in the EU. The results point out that although Croatia acquires significant benefits from the EU accession, the very event is not recognized as being the key one by high school students. Considering that in many cases the youth opinion is the best indicator of overall social problems and considering the future programs and obligations as well as the role expected from the youth in implementation of these programs, the research findings on the perception of the event of Croatia's accession to the EU are a field within which future policy activities are envisaged.

Keywords: knowledge; Croatia; European Union; EU accession; high school students; opinion polls



Citation: Pisarović, A.; Tišma, S.; Dujmović, K.A.; Škrtić, M.M. The Event of Croatia's EU Accession and Membership from the Croatian High School Students' Perspective. *J. Risk Financial Manag.* **2021**, *14*, 2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/jrfm14010002>

Received: 21 October 2020

Accepted: 19 December 2020

Published: 23 December 2020

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1. Introduction

Since Europe is undergoing considerable demographic, economic, cultural and socio-political change, the national citizenship identities have been challenged by the simultaneous processes of European integration and the migration of people into and across Europe. (Faas 2007). Moreover, successful integration of the European Union (EU) is strengthened when citizens trust their institutions and policies, and citizens are aware of their importance in decision-making processes (Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani 2018). The EU membership has had a strong positive impact on Croatian economy and society.

The economy was in recession since the last quarter of 2008 for almost six years continuously and it shrank 13% cumulatively; within a year and a half in the EU Croatian economy was on the path of recovery (Eurostat 2020f). Between 2015 and 2019 Croatia's average annual GDP growth was 2.9%, leading Croatia to full economic recovery after a long pre-accession crisis period (Croatian National Bank 2020a). Stable GDP growth was mainly due to growing industrial production driven by soaring demand and exports of goods and services from other EU member states following the accession. Before 2013, total share of these exports within Croatian GDP was below 40% (Eurostat 2020d), and in 2017 the ratio reached 51.5% of GDP, breaking the 50% threshold for the first time in history (European Commission 2018). These figures clearly manifest the benefits of the EU's single market for the Croatian economy. Furthermore, the balance of payments (BOP) for trade in goods and services demonstrates a fundamental change within the Croatian economy in the first four years within the EU (Eurostat 2020c). The deficit of BOP was annually reaching almost 8% of Croatia's GDP prior to the EU accession, but from 2014 to 2017 BOP increased to around 1% (Croatian National Bank 2020b). As an EU member, Croatia's

economic growth was based on exports of goods and services and domestic consumption, in stark contrast to the pre-accession period (Eurostat 2020e).

Just before joining the EU, the unemployment rate reached 18.1%, only to fall to just above 6% in 2019—almost the average rate at the EU level (Eurostat 2020a). However, it should be pointed out that positive unemployment trends were not just a result of a growing demand in the Croatian labour market, but were also due to EU's free movement of workers. After 2013, thousands of Croatian citizens used this opportunity to seek jobs in other EU countries (Eurostat 2018b), as showcased in many other new EU members (Eurostat 2018a). However, this trend did not have an impact on the perception of Croatian citizens of the EU and its labour market (Eurostat 2020b), but rather it demonstrated opportunities of EU membership and unsatisfactory conditions of the domestic market (Eurostat 2019). More than seven years upon Croatia's accession to the EU, the attitude of citizens toward the EU is generally positive and the citizens' confidence in the EU institutions is larger than in the national authorities (European Commission 2019a, 2019b).

Croatia also benefited from EU funds, as the allocations from the Cohesion, Structural and other funds exceed almost tenfold the pre-accession assistance. In the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020 the European Commission allocated 10.7 billion euros to Croatia. Many big infrastructure projects in Croatia were supported in this period through the EU funds, including the Pelješac Bridge, the landmark project connecting the southernmost part of Croatia with the rest of the country's territory (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2020).

Following the Zagreb Summit in 2000 and the EU's promise of a European future for Southeast European countries, the Croatian governments, whether right or left centered, were determined to fulfil the EU accession program. Popular support for the EU is strongly dependent on the political elites' ability to shape the political discourse on the EU integration in a way that reflects national interests and culture (Herrmann et al. 2004). Thus far, evidence suggests that the member states of Europe have been slow to abandon their commitment to promoting national citizenship (Philippou et al. 2009). National curricula include information about European institutions and EU rights, but national citizenship remains the central focus of curricula and textbooks, and member states tend to reframe the notion of European citizenship to reflect the national model of citizenship and the histories, traditions, and socio-political priorities of the nation-state.

With the opening of EU accession negotiations in the fall of 2005, the Croatian government, namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which merged with the Ministry of European Integration becoming the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) in the same year, launched a series of public opinion polls among Croatian citizens to check the level of their support for the event of the Croatia's entrance in the EU. In the years leading up to the EU referendum, the MFEA was responsible for coordinating public administration in the process of aligning Croatia with the EU regulations; the MFEA organized information campaigns on the EU for Croatian citizens and was interested in public opinion polls. The Ministry engaged local opinion polling agencies, mainly *Ipsos Puls*, which in its research targeted all Croatian regions as well as age categories, where young people under 30 made up a special category. Since the Ministry's primary goal was providing a certain level of support for the EU accession, the research did not specifically target high school students or teenagers at the age of majority. Nevertheless, the Ministry continued to monitor the perception and attitude towards the EU during the accession year 2013 and beyond (Ministarstvo vanjskih i europskih poslova Republike Hrvatske 2019). The disadvantage of these surveys was a lack of specific age categories, which makes them even less analytical compared to the surveys conducted for the government using a similar methodology.

Efforts at the national level were followed by the efforts of academia and civil society, either individually or jointly, with or without support of the Croatian administration, often backed by EU funding. These efforts resulted in a series of surveys targeting various citizen groups and analysing their arguments for and against Croatia's EU membership event. In 2010, the Croatian constitution was amended to ensure the forthcoming EU referendum

validity, regardless of the turnout. That proved to be a justified decision since the turnout of voters on 22 January 2012 was below 50%—only 43.51%. The membership event was supported by 66.27% ([Ministarstvo vanjskih i europskih poslova Republike Hrvatske 2012](#)).

Surveys on attitudes and perceptions of high school students about the event of the EU accession in Croatia were conducted to a greater extent by civil society organizations and higher education institutions in Croatia ([GONG 2011a](#)). The findings show that the support towards EU integration is affected by ongoing developments in Croatia and in the EU, whereas a certain decline is visible. Moreover, one should underline certain tendencies. First, the trend shows that the youth is recognized as the potential main winner of the EU integration while the second trend shows that the younger ones in comparison to the older ones demonstrate greater pro-European orientation ([GONG 2011b](#)).

This is in accordance with the findings showing that youth is one of the hottest groups for communication of EU-related topics because they often overestimate their knowledge about the EU, but are mostly pro-European, as the EU opens up new opportunities and perspectives for them, mainly in terms of education and employment ([Popović et al. 2013](#)).

According to [Blanuša and Šiber \(2011\)](#) 20% of youth have not expressed attitude towards Croatia's joining the EU. The examined attitudes comprise both hopes and fears. Their hopes are for economic development, achievement of responsible governance and the implementation of European values in Croatia, while their fears concern economic colonization and political change.

In 2015 GONG launched a pilot educational program “Civic Literacy” within its EDUcentre. The program included 27 high school teachers who were trained through three program modules (political, media and the EU literacy) on how to communicate the idea of active citizenship to their students and, actually, how students can become citizens, not subjects. EU literacy is a GONG's module of the Education for Civil Literacy, which has been continuously evolving since 2012 ([GONG 2012](#)). Another project conducted in 2015 analysed social profile, problems, needs and potentials of young people in Croatia. However, only one question in the survey pertained to the EU ([Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš 2015](#)).

After the event of Croatia's accession to the EU on 1 July 2013, overall interest in citizens' opinion about this important event declined, leading to a significantly reduced number of public opinion polls on the EU-related topics in Croatia. Nonetheless, the referendum on Brexit in June 2016 echoed across the EU. The events in the United Kingdom (UK) have to some extent stimulated the feelings of those citizens in Croatia who were Eurosceptic or opposed the EU membership before accession or became Eurosceptic during the first years of membership.

Regardless of Brexit, negative perception and attitudes towards the event of Croatia's entrance to the EU have increased since the harsh reality after 2013 did not live up to the citizens' expectations. It should be noted that the year 2015 was the first year that Croatia saw growth of its GDP after the recession lasted for six years in a row with only two quarters in which the GDP had no negative value. The overall atmosphere about Croatia's accession to the EU was rather dark, in contrast to the “big bang”, i.e., the big EU enlargement that brought 10 new EU member states, mostly from Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the free movement of people within the EU led thousands, mostly young, highly educated people or skilled workers, to seek work in other parts of the EU, resulting in public criticism caused by “brain drain” and significant loss of manpower. The insufficient withdrawal of EU funds has reinforced Euroscepticism.

The main goal of this paper is to investigate high school attendees' level of knowledge according to (i) knowledge about the EU, (ii) knowledge about the EU perception, (iii) attitude towards the event of Croatia's EU accession and its full-fledged membership, and (iv) knowledge about EU awareness self-assessment, in order to improve their knowledge and obtain the best basis for effective inclusion in the Croatian and European scientific and economic fields.

The specific objectives are to identify critical links between certain areas of knowledge which should result in guidelines for the establishment of a focus in the future education

process (new model of teaching processes) and to provide a risk management model for the implementation of an enriched curriculum.

The hypothesis of this research is that students currently have little or insufficient knowledge from these areas in order to cope with the economic challenges in their environment today and in the future.

The paper starts with an explanation of methodology, which includes the sample for statistical data processing and the survey, while the main part of the paper is dedicated to the results concerning characteristics, structure and implementation of the mentioned objectives. The links between the level of knowledge and the type of knowledge and their interdependence have been investigated in a new innovative way.

2. Materials and Methods

Given the methodological approach, quantitative research was carried out on the presented sample. The survey method was used, and the obtained data were analysed through the calculation of mean, average and percentages. Then qualitative research was conducted, and descriptive data were collected. Furthermore, the PERT method was used, then the calculation of the variance, the variance on the critical path, standard deviations and the z score.

The critical path is a set of activities that have to be carried out after each other without waiting as the project (in our case the knowledge improvement project) is to be completed in the expected time. The time needed to improve the knowledge relating to each question in the questionnaire is individually proportionately higher as the accuracy of the response is lower. Mutual dependence between fundamental knowledge and new knowledge and information should be determined (Vătămănescu and Alexandru 2018). The risk of not adopting new knowledge in the given time arises with unexpectedly large inflow of new information in the unit of time. If we know in advance which knowledge and related activities are on a critical path and use the risk management model, we will be able to respond to the risk in a timely manner, e.g., by increasing resources or carrying out educational activities on different issues at the same time. In a situation when we cannot exactly determine the time needed to acquire new knowledge, we use the PERT method (Mileusnić Škrtić and Horvatinčić 2014).

The PERT method is commonly used to control the time needed to perform activities and costs. In our case we use PERT to control the time needed for educational activities related to specific issues of lack of knowledge about the EU (Mileusnić Škrtić and Horvatinčić 2014). The basic assumption relates to knowledge-related activities on a critical path. The sum of variances on the critical path gives variance of the project, and the calculation of standard deviation shows the size of a positive or negative deviation from the planned educational project duration. Furthermore, the z-score calculation will lead us according to Gauss's normal distribution curve to the probability of a successful education process. If we know this in advance, we can react in time using the risk management model by including risk response, risk monitoring and control and certainly promptly communicate each risk.

The scope of the research as well as the number of respondents, given their size, made it possible to generalize the results on high school attendees. The sample for statistical data processing consisted of:

- responses to the survey conducted in 10 high schools in Zagreb and encompassed 1350 students, 7 high schools in Vukovar-Srijem County and included 594 students, a total of 1994;
- equivalent data published on social networks and covered 15,834 representatives aged 17–18, from Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, Karlovac County, Varaždin County, Zadar County, Lika-Senj County, Šibenik-Knin County, Međimurje County, Koprivnica-Križevci County, Osijek-Baranja County, Bjelovar-Bilogora County;

- the project the “Film Festival of a creative documentary film on experiences in projects financed by the EU funds—ClosEUp” (20 workshops in 10 high schools in Split, Dubrovnik, Slavonski Brod and Krapina, 603 students);
- equivalent data obtained from other surveys by the Croatian Communications Association on the perception and awareness of the EU, 105 students from the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb
- information from the published research “Hopes and fears of the youth towards the European Union” (Blanuša and Šiber 2011).

At the end of the 2017/2018 school year, according to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, there were 438 active upper secondary schools on the territory of the Republic of Croatia, with 29,718 successful students at the 4th grade. The sample of this study covers 62.37% of the total number of students aged 17–18 in the 2017/2018 school year (79% were from urban areas and 21% were from rural areas). Some of the invited schools were not ready to participate in the study. Workshops on questionnaires were held in each school and discussions were conducted with students on the relevant issues. Furthermore, online webinars and discussions were held with participants.

Low-level knowledge was identified as risks and the associated causes and consequences, while the proposed answers with continuous supervision and control were identified and analysed as well. Continuous communication of risks is mandatory (Figure 1).

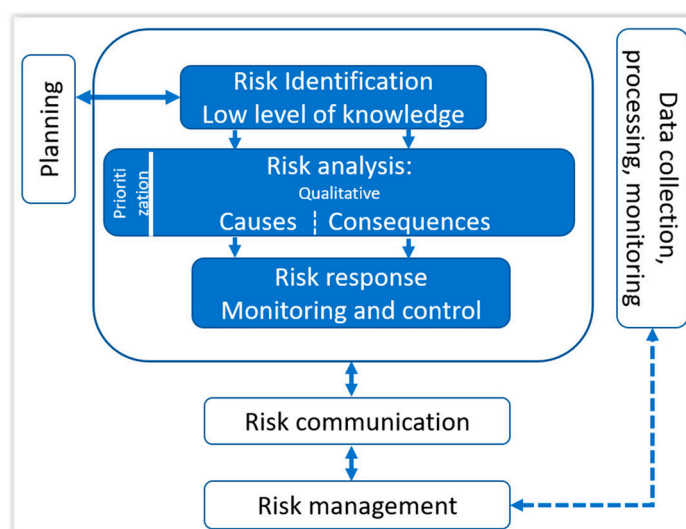


Figure 1. Risk management for low-level of knowledge.

The calculation of the probability of successful improvement of the low-level of knowledge over the forecasted period is an indicator for identifying new and verifying existing causes and removing or mitigating them to avoid the risk.

In the education program in secondary schools it is necessary to improve and include courses related to knowledge about the EU. The challenge consists of the need for the continued inclusion of new content and information in the field, as well as their proper linking with existing knowledge. In addition, a hybrid way of knowledge transfer involving the use of IT technology in addition to classical education is of crucial importance (Mileusnić Škrtić et al. 2011). It is necessary to combine practical and theoretical instruction and motivate students to participate actively as well as to apply learned knowledge with innovative participation in applying their own ideas (Kurpjuweit et al. 2018). Risks should be managed throughout the process and if any of the identified risks occur, they should be promptly answered (Mileusnić Škrtić and Horvatinčić 2014). There should always be a step ahead.

Starting from the 3-S model (Lee 2018) in his dealings with big data, whose application in the educational program would imply: in the first phase, substitution of new methods

and processes instead of existing ones; a connection between the existing knowledge and the new knowledge would follow in the second phase, and, in the third phase, a change in the direct teaching process would be introduced. The proposed model meets the principles: repeatability, replicability and reproducibility.

1. Repeatability

- 1 cycle: the high school introduces a new program for education on the EU based on the existing information, the members of education team collect tests results in the next period and, based on them, create enriched educational content,
- 2 cycle: combine data from other relevant sources and include them in their model thus obtaining significant predictions,
- 3 cycle: change their teaching process by making the most of their program, creating an online e-model to see how students accept it and whether they want such knowledge.

2. Replicability

Another high school that operates according to their principle can use the same model.

3. Reproduction

The same thing can be used by a higher education institution or any other educational organization with a different focus of teaching.

Since it is a framework within which each type of education will adapt in its own way in terms of its scope of activity, the application of this model leaves open questions in possible innovative applications or adaptations of the model itself.

2.1. Youth as a Research Target Group

The public cannot be viewed, analysed and questioned as a homogeneous group. For a number of reasons, this research focused on young people as a target group. Young people are traditionally regarded as the mirror of complex social relationships, as they reflect problems and antagonisms that shape the society. The attitudes and perceptions of young people are more flexible, which enables them to better accommodate themselves to new conditions, such as the event of Croatia's EU accession and its full EU membership, which is still to a great extent a novelty to the Croatian society. Regardless of the content of the survey, young people are more inclined to be open-minded and less responsive to specific social patterns. Young people are looking towards the future and are far less burdened with the past. These facts are of considerable importance for a research seeking to explore opinions on the EU in a country that has become a member only recently and is likely to remain in the EU in the coming years. The survey was aimed at high school students in the final grades, meaning young people slightly younger or just 18 years old at the time of the survey and were preparing to continue their education at colleges in Croatia or abroad or to seek employment in the Croatian labour market. The attitudes and perceptions of this group of young people were of particular interest for the research, because of the challenges posed by further education or employment identified by young people and other respondents as the areas in which changes would occur upon Croatia's joining the EU. Student and workforce mobility were rated as positive factors in the surveys. To a lesser extent, the accompanying fear factor was observed that can be attributed to the opening of the labour market and, consequently, to the "brain drain" as well as to the opening up of the Croatian labour market to foreigners who were a potential threat to the Croatian national identity. The opportunities and threats posed by the Croatia's EU accession event were mainly represented by the young people who needed to enrol in college or get a job in a changing market considering that, after Greece and Spain, Croatia was the member state with the highest youth unemployment rate ([European Commission 2017a](#)). These opinions on opportunities and threats have largely shaped the perception and attitudes of high school students who participated in the research.

The survey, as a quantitative method was used in this research. In January 2017, a total of 1944 high school graduates were interviewed in high schools, which included gymnasiums and vocational secondary schools in two Croatian counties, the City of Zagreb

and the Vukovar-Srijem County. Promotional workshops concerning the content of the subject of the questionnaire were held at each school.

This was the most extensive research ever conducted in Croatia. Similar surveys conducted by public opinion research agencies in Croatia (GfK—Center for Market Research, Ipsos Puls, CRO Demoscope) mostly had a sample of one thousand respondents. Being the capital of the country, its economic, political and cultural centre as well as having the status of a county where more than 20% of the Croatian population live, the City of Zagreb was selected for the survey. However, the reasons for the Vukovar-Srijem County selection for the survey was the fact that it was sorely affected during the latest war, that in turn caused high depopulation. The support for the event of Croatia's EU accession at the EU referendum was roughly the same in both counties, with over 65% of pro votes at the national average. The opinion poll method is appropriate for this kind of research because it gives researchers the freedom to design the survey in a desirable manner. The survey covered both general and specific research goals and was divided into four sections where questions were structured in the desired way for the research to be extensive. The disadvantage of this method is the lack of interaction between researchers and respondents, which is not the case in some qualitative research methods. In surveys using quantitative methods of opinion polling, respondents are already guided by the researcher in a certain way because the questions and answers are defined, without the possibility to interact or adapt according to their own preferences. In this study, the survey was identical for all students in all schools, and almost two thousand students could not have nearly the same level of knowledge, interest, let alone the views and perceptions of a complex subject such as the EU (4). Another method used in the research was a content analysis method that was applied to gain insight into the level of knowledge and information as well as perceptions and attitudes of high school students in Croatia.

2.2. Contents of the Survey

The survey consisted of four sections, each focused on a different area: (1) the EU knowledge; (2) the EU perception; (3) attitude towards the event of Croatia's EU accession and its full-fledged membership; (4) the EU awareness self-assessment. All the sections consisted of ten questions, with the exception of Chapter 4 that had five questions.

The first section covered questions about the basic knowledge on the EU, such as member states number, Croatia's accession date, the EU flag colours, the EC location as well as more demanding questions about the status of Turkey's EU accession negotiations or the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the EU.

The second section gave an insight into the knowledge of current issues that plague the EU, such as the migrant and refugee crisis, the EU institutions and their relationship with the EU citizens.

Respondents were asked whether they believed the EU could handle the refugee and migrant crisis on its own and, if the quota mechanism between the EU member states in regard to refugees and migrant distribution is righteous and whether the EU is too bureaucratic.

The third section was the most relevant in analysing high school students' views on Croatia's EU entrance event and its impact after four years of fully-fledged membership. Students were asked the questions such as: whether they believed that the accession event was a positive decision, whether it would stimulate growth and employment and whether freedom of movement within the EU as well as the membership itself would improve the living standard of Croatian citizens.

In section four, the respondents were required to assess their knowledge about the EU in general and the role of the EU Parliament as the institution representing the voice of the citizens.

3. Results

3.1. Knowledge about the EU

According to the results of the survey (Figure 2), the secondary school students have some basic knowledge about the EU: that each EU country had its representatives in the European Parliament (a) 94% know; that Croatia did not enter the EU in 2015 (b) 78% know; that the European flag does not consist of a circle of twelve white stars in the blue field (c) 69% know. In regard to the number of EU countries (d) 63% of high school students know that EU does not have 26 member states and 53% of them know that Norway and Switzerland are not part of the EU (e), 53% know that the EU headquarters is not in Strasbourg (f), and 51% know that any country that enters the euro zone does not automatically enter the Schengen area (g). Whether Croatian is one of the official EU languages (h) 35% know and whether the European Union was established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 (i) 23% know. Only 14% respondents know that negotiations between EU and Turkey are currently taking place (j).

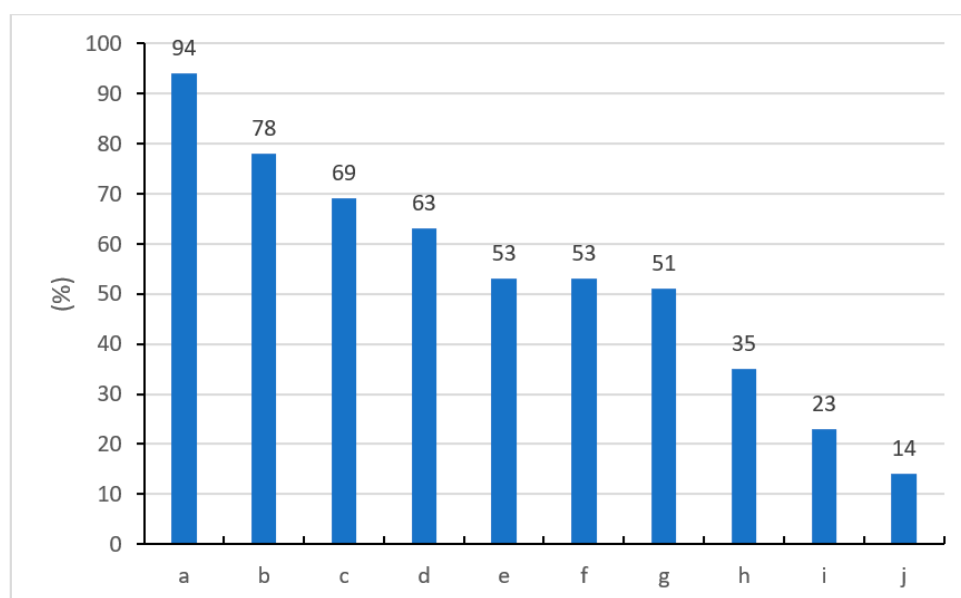


Figure 2. Knowledge about the European Union (EU).

The critical path and PERT methods were used; then the critical path (Figure 3) was found for a, e, f, and j categories, the standard deviation is 5.63 and the calculated z score is 0.177. The z-table indicates a 56.75% successful improvement of knowledge for future generations with the recommendation to be improved by using the model risk management for a low-level of knowledge (Figure 1).

3.2. The EU Perception

Based on the survey results (Figure 4): (a) 61% of respondents expected that the UK would leave the EU in the next five years, (b) 57% of students said they believed that new EU enlargement would take place in the next five years, (c) about 50% think the EU cannot handle the migrant and refugee crisis alone, (d) 50% think the economic crisis still exists and the future of the euro as a common currency is questionable, and (e) 49% believed that EU membership would play a greater role in the world and have an increasing impact on international events for member states. Other answers do not suggest positive attitude towards EU since only (f) 36% respondents think the mechanism of migrants and refugee allocation (quotas) is a fair solution, only (g) 20% claim the EU institutions are efficient and professional, while (h) only 17% think that citizens have influence on EU policies and institutions and (i) 13 % think it does not represent a burden on the common EU budget.

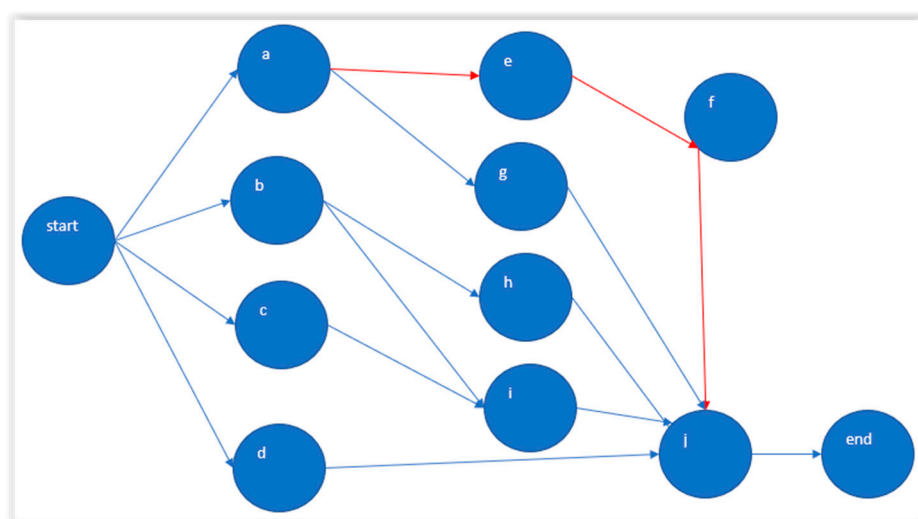


Figure 3. Critical path for knowledge about the EU.

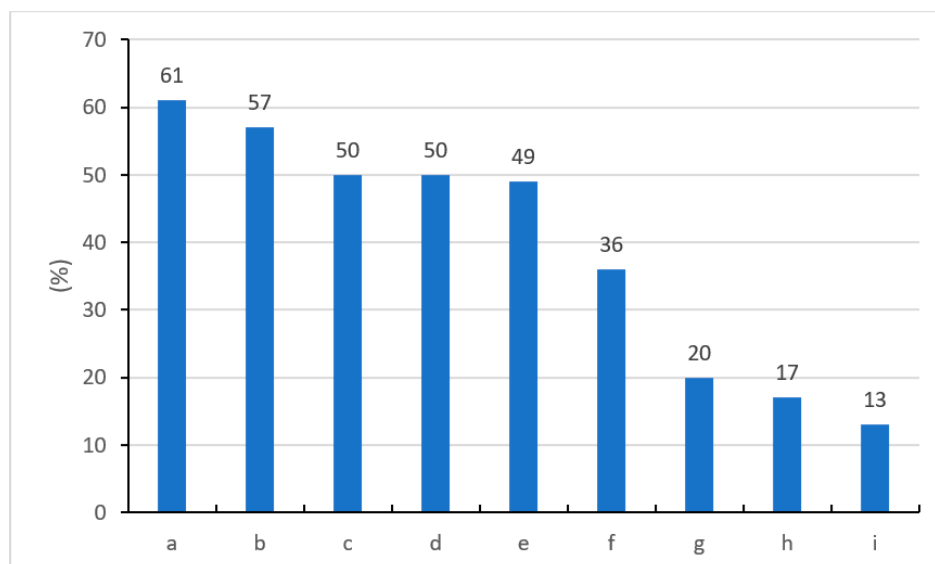


Figure 4. EU perception.

The PERT method and critical path method resulted with critical path found for activities b, c, f, g, h, (Figure 5), standard deviation is 4.08 and calculated z score is 1.72. The z-table indicates 95.73% successful improvement of knowledge for future generations with the help of the model (Figure 1).

3.3. Attitudes towards the Event of Croatia's Accession to the EU and Its Fully-Fledged Membership

Figure 6 shows the opinions that high school students expressed on Croatia's EU accession event and its fully-fledged membership. Although opinions on some topics are very positive, a majority of respondents believe that Croatia as a member state could perform better in many fields. In general, (a) 79% of students emphasize employment opportunities; (b) 36% consider that the membership stimulates the economic growth and employment in Croatia; (c) 30% of respondents believe Croatia has a stronger role in international political, economic and security issues as an EU member state, whereas (d) 23% think Croatia is successful in using available EU funds; (e) a further 19% of respondents think Croatia should introduce the euro as its currency in the next five years; (f) when asked if Croatia's EU accession and fully-fledged membership event had increased the

efficiency of Croatian institutions, only 18% answered positively; (g) furthermore, 11% think Croatia fights sufficiently for its interests on the EU level; (h) 9% of students believe that Croatian economy can compete with the economies of other EU member states and (i) only 8% of students believe that the living standard has improved since joining the EU.

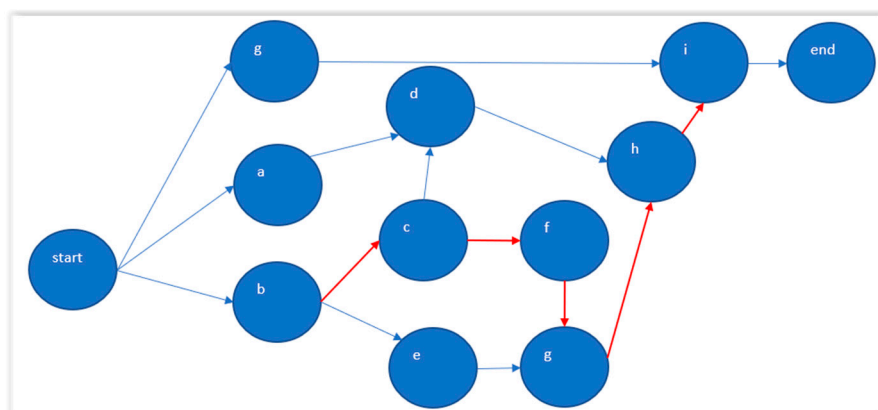


Figure 5. Critical path for knowledge about the EU perception.

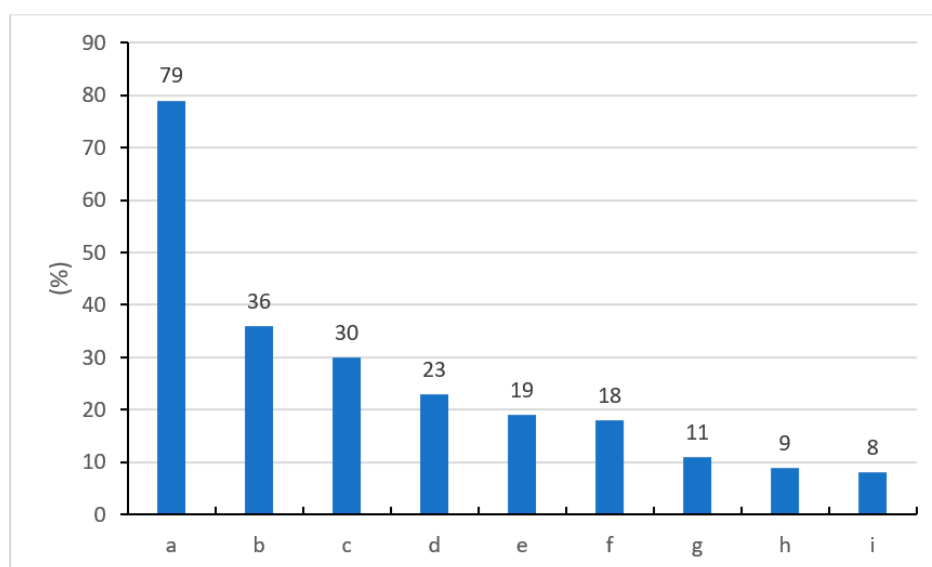


Figure 6. Attitudes towards the event of Croatia's accession to the EU and its fully-fledged membership.

Analogous, a critical path was found for activities b, a, e, h, i (Figure 7). The standard deviation is 4.08 and the calculated z score is 0.85; the z-table indicates an 85.83% successful improvement of knowledge for future generations with the recommendation of using the model Risk management for a low-level of knowledge (Figure 1).

Activities related to activities on a critical path should be promptly linked. Also, as a future model of educational content, mutual links between knowledge should be taken into account; especially during the continuous flow of new knowledge and information and their connection with initial fundamental knowledge.

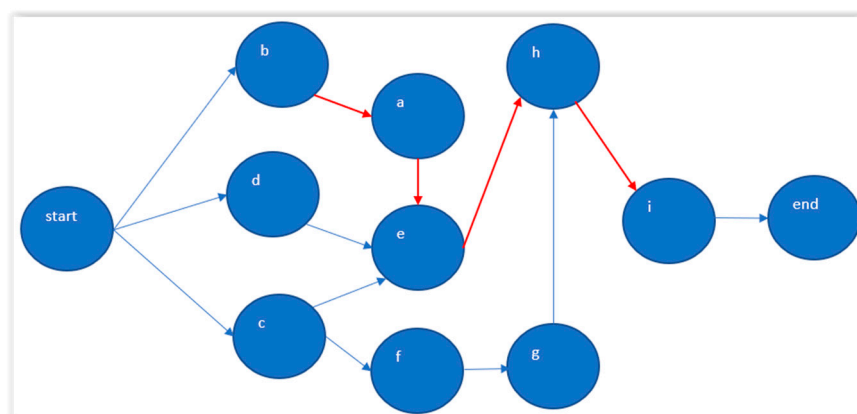


Figure 7. Critical path for attitudes towards the event of Croatia’s accession to the EU and its fully-fledged membership.

3.4. Self-Assessment of the EU Awareness

According to the results shown in Figure 8, (a) when asked about general knowledge on the EU, 47% of students believed they had moderate knowledge while 24% thought they had good knowledge; (b) furthermore, 40% of students said they had moderate knowledge about the EU decision-making process while 13% believed they had good knowledge; (c) when asked about the European Parliament, 38% thought their knowledge was moderate while 13% considered their knowledge good; (d) survey results show that 36% of respondents thought they were moderately informed about the European Parliament elections whereas 13% thought they were well informed; (e) when asked about getting the information on the EU, 34% students believed they were moderately informed, whereas 23% thought they were well informed.

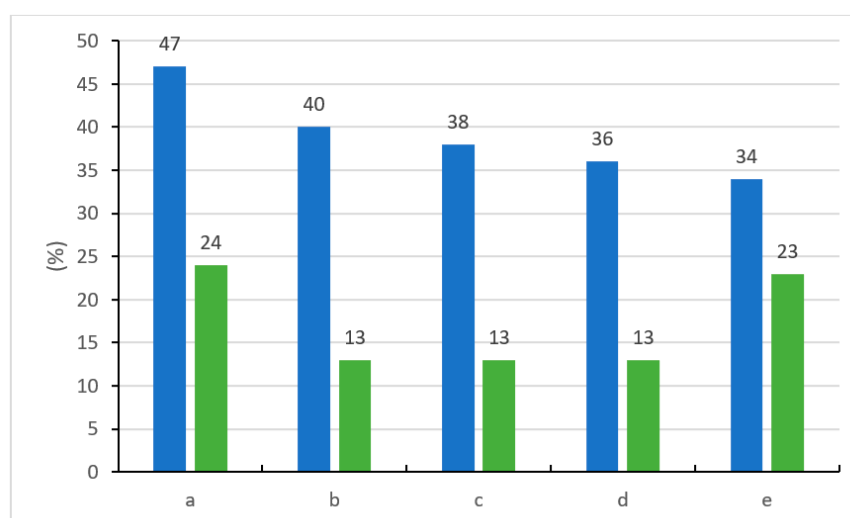


Figure 8. Self-assessment of the EU awareness.

3.5. Results according to PERT Critical Path Method and Risk Assessment

By introducing the PERT method and critical path we obtained an established sequence of activities related to specific knowledge and activities on a critical path both related to EU knowledge (a—each EU country had its representatives in the European Parliament, e—the EU headquarters are not in Strasbourg, f—any country that enters the euro zone does not automatically enter the Schengen area, j—negotiations between the EU and Turkey are currently taking place) and related to the EU perception (b—new EU enlargement would take place in the next five years, c—the EU cannot handle the migrant and refugee crisis alone, f—the mechanism of migrants and refugee allocation (quotas) is a fair solution,

g—EU institutions are efficient and professional, h—citizens have influence on EU policies and institutions) and predictions for the successful improvement of knowledge.

Activities on a critical path are more recent knowledge that builds on the fundamental, so it is necessary to continuously and without delay embed and link all new information to existing knowledge during the educational process. Assuming the duration of activity (pessimistic, most likely, optimistic) related to specific knowledge, the PERT method, critical path method and z-score indicate that the model in which knowledge transfer activities are structured would immediately build on adequate fundamental knowledge, the existing level of knowledge would increase by 56.75% in the case of knowledge about the EU, and by 85.83% in the case of attitudes towards the event of Croatia's accession to the EU and its fully-fledged membership. The main identified risks are: poor structure of content passed on to students, lack of use of new technologies in the educational process, lack of links to schools in other EU countries, lack of student interest and lack of funds in the education system. An analysis of the probability of risk occurrence and the probability of risk effect determined the risk exposure according to which a priority risk list was defined. These results of the application of the PERT critical path method and risk analysis serve as basis for the establishment of a new model of teaching processes and risk management model for the implementation of enriched curriculum. Risk assessment of implementation of these results shows that according to priority risk list the greatest attention should be paid to lack of new content and information in the field, wrong linking of new information with existing knowledge, poor exchange of students and practical experience of acquiring knowledge in educational institutions in the EU, poor use of IT technology, lack of a combination of theoretical and practical instruction, absence of innovative participation of students and development of their own ideas, as well as of practical work possibility in EU businesses during student practice. Identified risks should be monitored, controlled and promptly responded to during the time of application of a custom 3-S model (Lee 2018) in educational program.

Three paths of the education are offered:

- (a) Disseminating knowledge about the EU—should follow continued inclusion of new content and information in the field, as well as their proper linking with existing knowledge. Furthermore, use the hybrid way of knowledge transfer involving the use of IT technology in addition to classical education;
- (b) Developing the perception of the EU—should combine practical and theoretical instruction and should motivate students to participate actively as well as to combine acquired knowledge with innovative participation in applying their own ideas, i.e., to get prepared to implement the obligations taken over and to adequately face the new challenges of Croatia within the EU both today and in the future;
- (c) Changing attitudes towards the EU—include practical experience and knowledge in the educational programme during the exchange of students, especially from the aspect of development programmes and labour markets while offering them practical work experience in companies across the EU as part of student practice thus confronting them with the real state of play first hand.

4. Discussion

According to the results of the opinion polls, certain conclusions can be drawn with regard to the survey sections. When it comes to overall knowledge about the EU, it can be said that the knowledge level is satisfactory and that high school students in Croatia have acquired basic knowledge on the EU. However, when going into details, their knowledge is lacking.

The astonishing figure of only 14% of respondents who know that the EU will not expand in the coming years shows both a lack of knowledge and interest in the EU enlargement process in which Croatia was involved until a few years ago. This suggests that students seem to be more interested in the functioning of the EU itself than in the enlargement process. Furthermore, the fact is that high school students are gen-

erally unaware that Croatian is one of the EU official languages, which leads them to believe that the EU lacks democracy. There is an overwhelming ignorance concerning the fact that the EU membership does not include the Schengen area and euro zone, which is rather puzzling. The respondents are distrustful regarding the EU migrant crisis and the imposed quota system which is in line with those of the most EU citizens (European Commission 2016). The prevailing belief that other EU member states will follow the UK and Brexit is quite worrying and shows that Brexit influences students' perceptions on the EU's future. Educational deficit stemming from lack of information is just one of the factors that, coupled with prejudice and stereotypes, resulted in European integration in general (Popović et al. 2013). Explaining Euroscepticism has already received much scholarly attention (Hobolt and Vries 2016).

Within the literature on Euroscepticism, a number of theories are put forward which (causally) link education with support for European integration (Hakhverdian et al. 2013). One of the most consistent findings in the literature on Euroscepticism is that the lower educated are more Eurosceptic than the higher educated (Hakhverdian et al. 2013; Lubbers and Jaspers 2011). Education is argued to reduce Euroscepticism through the enhancement of cognitive skills, socialisation into cosmopolitan values and improvement of one's position on the (international) labour market. Whatever the mechanism might entail, all these explanations share the implicit assumption that more education leads to a change in attitudes towards the EU. The common denominator among these definitions is the observation that higher and lower educated are strongly polarised on issues related to immigration and European integration (Van der Brug and Spanje 2009).

The fact that 50% of respondents believed that the EU was still in economic crisis although the situation improved prior to Covid-19 crisis is quite worrying and suggests that the perception of a long-term economic recession in both the EU and Croatia is still present and deeply rooted.

The opinion poll results reflect a common belief among the Croatian citizens that the EU citizens have no influence on such a bureaucratic institution with a large and costly administrative apparatus and a doubt in its efficiency. However, almost 50% of respondents believe that the event of Croatia's EU entrance event and its full membership strengthens Croatia's role in the world and increases its influence on international events, which proves the students' belief that Croatia, as a small country, has the benefit of joining a large community of nations at least internationally (European Commission 2017b).

The opinion that Croatia is not well represented at the EU level being in line with the prevailing disbelief in the EU institutions as well as the opinion that Croatia as an EU member state gained more influence in the international arena as an EU member state are somewhat ambivalent.

The figure that is really relevant for this research shows that 80% of respondents believe that employment opportunities in the EU represent a positive aspect of the Croatia's EU accession event. It suggests that young people see positive effects of the EU membership only in the area of their primary interest. There is a great mobility within the EU among students and young people in search for jobs.

On the other hand, a figure of only 23% of respondents believing that Croatia will be able to fully utilize and use EU funds is a worrying one, since opinion polls before Croatia's accession to the EU showed that the EU funds were perceived as one of the main benefits of the EU membership (4). Of particular concern is that only 9% of respondents believe that Croatian economy can cope with the competition from other EU member states, indicating that the same fears identified in the opinion polls conducted before the EU accession continue to persist. Distrust in Croatian economy was further induced by the collapse of Croatian industry, the most dramatic example being the dairy industry. Only 18% of respondents believe that Croatia's EU membership has increased the efficiency of Croatian institutions. This result supports other studies showing that Croatian citizens' confidence in governmental institutions is one of the lowest in the EU (Public Integrity and Trust in Europe 2015). Moreover, the fact that only 8% of respondents believe the living standard of

Croatian citizens has improved since Croatia's EU accession event also contributes to the indifference of public opinion on the EU membership, which is in line with the figure of 19% of those who believe that Croatia should not introduce euro as its currency in the next five years. This figure should be of particular concern for the Croatian government, which in 2017, after completing this survey, announced its plan for introducing euro by entering the European exchange rate mechanism (ERM II).

According to a monthly poll by CRO Demoskop, conducted by Promocija Plus agency in November 2017, 60% of Croatian citizens were against introducing the euro as official currency (CRO Demoskop 2017).

When analysing the respondents' awareness of the EU almost half of the surveyed students believe their knowledge about the decision-making process, elections and the role of the European Parliament is poor. That is worrying since the European Parliament is the EU institution that should represent their voice in the EU. These results are in line with the lack of interest and responsiveness of Croatian citizens to the European Parliament elections in 2013 and 2014, when turnout was only 25.3%. In the end, it seems quite optimistic that about 70% of respondents think they are moderately or even well informed about the EU.

According to the Standard Eurobarometer (European Commission 2019a) the higher turnout in the 2019 European elections is due to the greater interest of young voters.

In Croatia, the turnout increased by almost 5 percentage points compared to the last elections and amounted to 29.8%. The increase of 5 percentage points was recorded in both age groups (18% turnout of young people up to 24 years and 25% turnout of young people in the age group of 25–39 years). Priority topics for Croatian voters in the last European elections were: economy and growth (67%), combating youth unemployment (55%) and social protection, consumer rights and food safety (37%).

The research so far showed that education is becoming an increasingly important factor in structuring certain political attitudes (Stubager 2008, 2010; Van de Werfhorst and Graaf 2004). The education system is usually considered as an important resource for the formation of European identity, and this expectation can be found both in scholarly literature and in the European Union (EU) policy documents (Heater 1992; Keating et al. 2009; Mulcahy 1991; Ross 2007; Ryba 1995). Several authors have claimed that more and better knowledge about the European institutions and about the other EU member states will positively correlate with more positive attitudes toward European integration (European Parliament 2006; Gabel 1998; Inglehart 1970; Keating 2009; Ollikainen 2001). While this might seem a plausible assumption, a number of case studies have highlighted the fact that not all education systems in Europe provide the same kind of information about the EU (Georgi 2008; Philippou et al. 2009). In some countries, education system is expected to be supportive of the process of further European integration, while for cultural, historical or political reasons this is obviously not the case in other member states (Faas 2007; Philippou 2005). Faas (2007) stated that the need for pan-European youth studies is of utmost importance due to social, demographic, economic, political and cultural changes in contemporary Europe. Since all EU countries are presently autonomous in matters of education a common approach to the initiatives that have been promoted by the European Commission and the Council of Europe in promoting European identity, citizenship and a European dimension in education would become a necessity.

5. Conclusions

Although through the event of the EU accession and its EU membership, Croatia has made significant strides in economic and social fields, there still remains some space for the expansion of the knowledge of the very event, its advantages as well as challenges.

The hypothesis of this research has been proven as detailed research shows that students currently have little or insufficient knowledge from these areas in order to cope with the economic challenges in their environment today and in the future.

It is necessary to establish a mutual link between new knowledge and fundamental knowledge which will enable continuous improvement and smooth and easy acceptance of

all new information on a daily basis. The extended 3-S model applied to educational content will innovatively improve educational processes. Furthermore, by applying provided risk management model for the implementation of enriched curriculum and by the use of new IT technologies, a new platform for fast, safe and efficient teaching process will be established, which will result in excellent educated students ready to engage in all aspects of the economic and social environment.

Regardless of a range of benefits achieved in the Croatian society due to its EU accession, the knowledge, attitudes and awareness on the EU has been continuously questioned. At the same time, one of the often neglected groups in the studies conducted is youth, i.e., high school students that are not yet present in the labour market. The findings of the research conducted among high school students point out that two thirds of respondents (65%) believe that Croatia has benefited from the Croatia's EU accession and membership event and 59% say "their voice has influence in the EU". This percentage is even higher among young people up to 24 and in the age group 25–39 years (64%). According to this indicator, Croatia is above the EU average: 59% of respondents agree with the statement that their vote is influential which is the most positive result for this indicator since 2002.

The importance of these attitudes of the youth is even greater when observing new challenges, the EU membership has for Croatia, in which their significant contribution is expected in the future when they step into the labour market. From the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2021–2027) the EU will allocate 12.7 billion euros to Croatia. An additional 9.4 billion euros will be allocated through the EU's recovery instrument "EU Next Generation". Adding to it will be 6 billion euros from the current MFF that can be used in the next period, the total EU financial assistance for Croatia can grow up to 28 billion euros. A large portion of this allocation will again be used for infrastructure projects, among others the reconstruction of the obsolete railway systems in Croatia. Croatia can also benefit from the EU Green Deal which will reshape European economy, and the country is already the regional leader in renewable energy, with already 700 MW of installed wind and solar energy power plants.

Therefore, the recommendations according to the research results are twofold: First, methods related to ex ante and ex post analyses should be used as much as possible. The example of evaluation of the event of Croatia's EU accession by the high school students points out to frequently neglected perception of a group of young people who are not yet present at the labour market, which often provides a new dimension to the reflection upon the event being evaluated; Second, youth whose perception of the event have been assessed, should at present be ready to implement the obligations taken over and to adequately face the new challenges of Croatia within the EU both today and in the future. Thus, on the basis of the research findings, it is recommended to the development decision makers to prepare public policies that include strengthening of knowledge and skills as well as inclusion of the youth in the topics concerning the EU along with the strengthening of the position and role of Croatia in the EU.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.T.; methodology and formal analysis, S.T. and M.M.Š.; results and discussion A.P.; investigation, K.A.D.; resources, S.T.; writing—original draft preparation, A.P., S.T., M.M.Š. and K.A.D.; writing—review and editing, A.P., S.T. and K.A.D.; visualization, S.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was co-funded by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education.

Institutional Review Board Statement: "Not applicable" for studies not involving human or animals.

Informed Consent Statement: "Not applicable" for studies not involving human.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the co-funder's regulations.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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